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Derek H. Burney: The answer on climate change is adaptation, not apocalyptical prophecies

The public has a right to be cynical when the behaviour of their leaders belies their virtuous rhetoric

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A person rides a bike on the dried brown grass in Hyde Park in London, Britain, August 13, 2022. REUTERS/Kevin Coombs

Record heatwaves in North America, Europe and elsewhere gave new life to climate change crusaders who get headlines predicting apocalypse tomorrow. Global temperatures may be rising but that is not creating a dangerous, more cataclysmic world because, thanks to economic growth and material development, human societies are more resilient and more adaptable. Moreover, politicians who focus singularly on climate change ignore the fact that people today are more concerned about inflation, especially rising food and energy prices.

As Michael Shellenberger noted in his book Apocalypse Never, there has been a 92 per cent decline in the decadal death toll from natural disasters since its peak in the 1920's. Despite the current hysteria we have arguably never been less vulnerable and better able to cope with the vicissitudes of the climate.

Western societies are becoming richer but, as Spiked columnist Tim Black writes, they "were also increasingly lacking both moral and cultural belief in themselves … The future itself was starting to loom up before them as a series of potential threats, from pandemics and nuclear wars to ecological collapse." Apocalyptic imagination is stimulated by fear of the future.

We need a more confident attitude towards the challenges and crises ahead, and in our capacity to adapt rationally with practical measures to attenuate climate change. Instead of treating heat waves and floods as omens of a catastrophic future, we should see them as challenges we can and will overcome.

By all means, replace coal plants expeditiously with natural gas; extend the life of nuclear plants and build new ones. Install more modular nuclear reactors as well to replace diesel, and yes, plant more trees. These are measures that would actually reduce emissions today more than nebulous targets that few countries will or can realistically meet.

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Extreme energy price increases could have been avoided if the West had not undermined its own energy security like U.S. President Joe Biden's moratorium on gas leases and his abrupt cancellation of the Keystone pipeline, Europe's over-reliance on Russian supply and Canada's regulatory actions to stifle all fossil fuel production.

Climate evangelists oppose producing more low cost fertilizer because it is derived from natural gas. When Sri Lanka was prodded by environmental activists and the World Economic Forum to ban synthetic fertilizer, food production collapsed, and the currency defaulted. Public protests overran the presidential palace forcing the president to flee the country and the government to resign.

In the Netherlands, drastic government demands that nitrogen oxide and ammonia emissions be reduced drastically by up to 70 per cent prompted massive protests by farmers who contended that their production would be crippled just as global hunger is rising. In Ireland, farmers are resisting government plans to reduce agricultural emissions by 25 per cent.

Meanwhile, Canada is pledging to cut fertilizer and ammonia emissions by 30 per cent as of 2030 — proposals that arouse outrage, particularly in western Canada.

These restrictions will perversely contribute to shortages of supply at a time of greatest need. Little thought is being given to the social or economic costs these arbitrary measures will convey.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is exacerbating both the energy and global food crises. Until Turkey brokered a fragile deal with Ukraine and Russia to allow exports of grain from Odesa, Russia's blockade had curtailed most Ukrainian exports.

The world currently gets 80 per cent of its energy from fossil fuels and, even if all climate policies were fully implemented, fossil fuels would, according to the International Energy Agency, still provide more than half the energy by mid-century. That is an expression of realism over fantasy.

As Bjorn Lomborg asserted in the Wall Street Journal, "Instead of sending energy prices sky-high by trying to force a transition to renewables prematurely, policy makers should focus on funding research to develop clean energy sources that are actually affordable and reliable. And, instead of badgering farmers to go organic, governments should promote research to develop varieties of crops and agricultural practices that deliver higher yields with a smaller environmental footprint."

A surprise compromise brokered by U.S. Senate Majority Leader, Chuck Schumer with Senator Joe Manchin, euphemistically labeled the "Inflation Reduction Act," will salvage some of the administration's Build Back Better Plan — notably subsidies for renewables and pharmaceutical benefits, along with increased taxes and a modest reduction in the national debt. But most independent analysts believe that this package will increase, not reduce inflation.

Moreover, the administration's virtue signalling is not helped by the fact that Special Presidential Envoy on Climate Change John Kerry's private family jet emitted 325 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide since Biden took office — 138 metric tonnes from January — August 2021 alone. Zoom calls could have replaced a few of his junkets?

On the hypocrisy scale among environmental zealots, Canada's Prime Minister cannot be far behind. The National Post reported that Justin Trudeau flew a total of 26, 238 kms on 20 flights in July alone this year. Last summer, he flew 26,059 kms on CANFORCE ONE.

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60 per cent from international flights. By comparison, the average person's carbon footprint globally is seven tonnes per year; that of the average American is 21 tonnes per year.

The public has a right to be cynical when the behaviour of their leaders belies their virtuous rhetoric.

As Lomborg concluded ominously, "When people are cold and hungry, they rebel. If the elites continue pushing incredibly expensive policies that are disconnected from the major challenges facing most people, we need to brace for chaos."

Steven Koonin stated in his book Unsettled: "Adaptation is the most feasible approach as it can be effective whether climate change is natural or human-based."

Adaptation is a more realistic response to the climate challenge than cataclysmic prophecies of doom or illusory "net zero by 2050" targets.

Derek H. Burney is a former, 30 year career diplomat who served as Ambassador to the United States of America from 1989-1993.

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